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SUBJECT: YEREVAN-BATUMI TRAIN DEPARTS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN
14 YEARS

¶1. A train departed Yerevan for the Georgian Black Sea resort town of Batumi on June 17, marking the first train service between the Armenian capital and the autonomous region of Adjara in 14 years. According to press reports quoting Georgian Minister of Economic Development Irakli Chogovadze, Adjara expects 50,000 Armenians visitors this year, up from 20,000 last year. Chogovadze was in town to mark the renewal of the passenger train service, which is scheduled to run until September 15. According to press reports, Chogovadze and Armenian Prime Minister Andranik Margarian said they were optimistic that the rail link would stimulate cooperation between Armenia and Georgia. Margarian said he plans to visit Adjara in July.

¶2. Margarian and Chogovadze are joined in their enthusiasm by an optimistic (and perhaps self-serving) representative of Armenia's tourist industry. "Tourism is the sector that unites," said Araik Vardanian, the Executive Director of the Union of Incoming Tour Operators of Armenia, during a seminar on Armenian-Georgian relations last week. He noted that the tourism sector could be the key to the improvement of Armenian-Georgian relations. (Note: Vardanian is probably overstating the case, but it is true that Batumi is a popular destination for landlocked Armenians. During the Soviet era, Batumi and the rest of the Georgian Black Sea coast was a favorite vacation spot for apparatchiks and workers alike. After the fall of the USSR, Armenian tourism to Batumi and nearby Kobuleti slowed down, and has only begun to pick up in the last four or five years. Batumi is the nearest, cheapest option for a real seaside vacation for Armenians. End Note.)
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